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Introduction to the Music of

Gounod

by

NORMAN DEMUTH

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INTRODUCTION TO THE MUSIC OF

Gounod

Chapter I

THE BACKGROUND

FOR a great many years Gounod (1818-93) has been under a cloud in this country. His name has been taken for granted and it is fashionable to view him with scarcely veiled contempt as a figure completely divorced from the realities of either his day or ours. Of all the nineteenth-century French composers he is the one whose star has been completely eclipsed by that of his contemporaries. This eclipse is reasonable because it is only the few among the French composers of the period who appeared to say something new and original. Berlioz stands out for his treatment of the orchestra, Franck for his influence on symphonic music; but there is nothing to which one can point as being specifically 'Gounod', and on the surface he seems to be completely negative. As is usual the pendulum has swung over too far and although there is a quantity of his music which is utterly contemptible, this is not to say that there is nothing of intrinsic value. We search in vain for *Faust* today; thirty years ago one could not avoid it. Fortunately contemporary judgement has long since disposed of the sacred works, but the disregard

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of *Faust*, *Philémon et Baucis* and *Le Médecin malgré lui* is completely unjustified. The young intelligentsia of today has probably never heard *Faust*, and probably has never heard of the other operas; nothing is more galling than to hear one who in his day was a great figure disparaged by ignorant tittle-tattle.

I do not suggest for one moment that in his music Gounod proclaimed himself a great composer for all time, but in many respects he was a master. In some he was unique, and it is difficult to think of any other whose reputation was built upon so few successes and so many failures. In whatever light we may view him, he must be credited with being one of the first in the field where Bach was concerned. He brought out an edition of some of the *Chorale-Preludes* which at the time were unknown in Paris save to Reicha, Franck and Boëly. The Conservatoire refused to adopt it as an 'official' book, considering that Bach's several departures from text-book traditions would raise alarm and despondency as well as suspicion in the minds of the students. The collection was not published until 1870. While at the Villa Medeci Gounod studied Palestrina and the old music, in which he was quite alone.

There were two Gounods, the worldly and the spiritual. He was a mixture of generosity and jealousy. He volunteered to complete anonymously Lalo's *Namouna* when Lalo was stricken by a nervous breakdown, but when Franck's Symphony was produced he described it as 'an affirmation of incompetence driven

to the length of a dogma' because it touched heights which he was unable to reach. He was alternately pompous and humble. It was his habit to bless everyone he spoke to. Jacques Durand says that when his father introduced him to Gounod, the great man gravely said, 'Remember, my young friend, that the perfect concord is something prodigious, and on it one can build a cathedral.' He expressed his determination to compose a Mass in Rheims Cathedral, kneeling on the stone upon which Joan of Arc stood—a most uncomfortable posture for any composer to adopt while working. He refused the *Prix de Rome* to Paul Dukas, although the rest of the committee were unanimously in his favour. All through his life these two Gounods warred against each other, and it is easy to follow the course of the conflict in the chronological order of his works.

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Chapter II

THE OPERAS

(a) GENERAL SUMMARY

Gounod was an indefatigable writer of operas and was undeterred by failure. Some of these operas lived but a short while; others had a precarious if rather longer existence, while two enjoyed quite a long spell of popularity. The first opera (and first failure) was *Sapho*. From this work only one aria 'O ma lyre immortelle' has survived. The music could not have been as bad as all that, however, for Berlioz was enraptured with the third act. *Sapho* enjoyed six performances. Produced in 1851, it was followed by *La Nonne sanglante* in 1854. Of this cheerful work nothing remains and it is a curious point that the composer with such a marked religious disposition should choose such a libretto. It had been offered to at least five other composers, including Berlioz and Spontini, and had been turned down by each. Both these works were produced at the Paris Opéra, known in turn as the 'Académie nationale de musique' and the 'Théâtre impériale de l'opéra', such being the benefits of nationalization of music that the centre of the national opera found itself with a different name according to the changes of constitution. The first work to achieve a measure of success was the charming *Le Médecin malgré lui* to a libretto by Carré and

Barbier based on Molière's comedy. The Paris Opéra, however, had fought shy of Gounod after his first two failures, and this work was produced at the Théâtre Lyrique which specialized in what is known as *opéra-comique*. This genre does not have to be at all funny. The qualifications include spoken dialogue and a happy ending. *Carmen* in its original form with spoken lines instead of recitative is an *opéra-comique*. Nowadays there is no clear dividing line between this and *opéra sérieuse* since Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* was produced at the Paris Opéra Comique and not at the Opéra. Generally speaking, a work light and deft enough for the Opéra Comique does not receive production at the Opéra, whether there is spoken dialogue or not.

Known as 'The Mock Doctor', *Le Médecin malgré lui* enjoyed some popularity in London. The music was light enough to please those not particularly musical and of high enough quality to satisfy the intelligentsia. The literary and dramatic world, however, did not approve of utilizing the ideas of a French dramatist for this purpose.

It was on 19th March 1859 that Gounod took his place among the undisputed masters of European music when *Faust* received its first performance. The eventual success of this work (for it was only after some few performances that the public appreciated it) drew the attention of the authorities of the Opéra to Gounod, but before anything could be put on, one of the most charming operas in the repertoire,

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Philémon et Baucis, was produced at the Théâtre Lyrique on 18th February 1869. This work was originally written in one act for performance in Baden, but for the Paris production Gounod extended it to three. Later it was reduced to two. It is a pity that only one aria remains today, Vulcan's song, because the entire work is of high value.

Gounod made his return to the Opéra on 27th February 1862 when *La Reine de Saba* was produced and failed immediately. Only the recitative and aria 'Lend me your aid' and 'She alone charmeth my sadness' and the Processional March remain.

Mireille, produced on 19th March 1864 at the Théâtre Lyrique, was an immediate success, thanks to the excellence of the cast. Originally in five acts, Gounod reduced it to three by the end of the year, but it did not appear in this form until 1876. The overture has long been a favourite with our military bands in summer seasons. The success of this work, now fallen completely out of existence anywhere but in France, resulted in *La Colombe*, again written for Baden but produced in Paris on 7th June 1866. This has also passed into oblivion; not so its successor *Roméo et Juliette*, produced on 27th April 1867. This work enjoyed great success owing to its famous 'Waltz Song' and other coloratura arias which were written with the singer's agility in view. It is only within recent memory that it has disappeared from the English stage.

These successes drew the attention of the Opéra to

the possibilities of *Faust*, which continued to draw large audiences to the Théâtre Lyrique. In spite of the failure of *La Reine de Saba*, *Faust* was adopted by the Opéra and since 3rd March 1869 there have been no signs of any abatement in popularity. His last three operas, *Cinq Mars* (1877), *Polyeucte* (1878) and *Le Tribut de Zamora* (1881) failed to hold the stage, but undeservedly so in the case of the second.

This was the period when librettists took the plots of well-known plays and novels and adapted them to their needs. This resulted in some abuses, the arch offender being Ambroise Thomas, who used free adaptations of Shakespeare for his operas. The word 'from' covered a multitude of sins.

Gounod left behind him an unfinished opera called *Maître Pierre* on the subject of Héloïse and Abélard, but it was not disclosed until 1904 when Mme Gounod showed it to Saint-Saëns. Saint-Saëns passed it on to Reynaldo Hahn, who wrote out a 'reduction' for voice and piano. M. Gustave Samazeuilh speaks highly of certain movements which were performed at the Concerts Colonne. Unfortunately by 1904 the interest in Gounod had settled down almost exclusively with *Faust* and *Roméo*, and no account of a complete theatrical production can be found. A posthumous work by a composer, no matter how great, stands little chance if the composer is great only as an historical figure and as the composer of one particular work.

He also wrote several sets of incidental music.

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Gounod proved his sense of the theatre in this music even more than in the operas, for this is specialized writing where the composer is subservient to the dramatic producer and must be able to sink his own feelings in many instances. It is a certain test of control of inspiration. A sense of distance is imperative and the composer must himself be extremely sensitive to the situations.

These operas of Gounod have, of course, been swamped by *Faust* and *Roméo*, and this is an undeserved fate. One-work composers are to be found in so many places, and it is always sad to find them, because it does not follow that the work in question is of higher quality than the others. Fine music though *L'Apprenti Sorcier* undoubtedly is, no one can maintain that it is more worthy of constant repetition than *La Péri* or the two great piano works. Nevertheless, by this work is Dukas most known, and will continue to be so in the way that Gounod is 'the composer of *Faust*'.

Although *Le Médecin malgré lui* and *Philémon et Baucis* failed in that they did not attract large audiences, musicians saw in Gounod the direct antithesis to Berlioz and thought that in him they might find what they called 'the French Mozart'. By this they did not mean that the mantle of Mozart had fallen upon Gounod, but that in his music they found the lightness and deftness of touch which they associated with *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Così fan tutte*. Little did they know the ponderosity that their new

composer would in due course manifest, and it is one of the world's tragedies that he did not pursue his course along operatic lines.

(b) PHILÉMON ET BAUCIS—FAUST

Philémon et Baucis explains its own failure. There are precisely four characters in it and no more. Thus the public lost interest after three acts, and not even when it was reduced to two for its production at the Opéra-comique on 16th May 1876 was there any increased interest. In its original one-act form it was exactly right and this extension is simply one of many examples of the folly of trying to make an entity already complete, more so. However, this slender cast makes it all the more remarkable that attempts have not been made to revive it in these recent days of 'chamber opera'—not that *Philémon et Baucis* is quite as small as this. The story is amusing and admirably portrayed in the music.

It is laid in Phrygia. Philémon and Baucis, two very old people who have been happily married for years, are sitting by their fire listening to a terrific storm raging outside. There is a knock at the door, and Jupiter and Vulcan, in the guise of mortals, ask for shelter. This is willingly granted, and in return for the hospitality Jupiter discloses himself and promises them anything they may like to ask. They immediately ask for the return of their youth. This is given them instantaneously—and then the trouble begins. Baucis is such an extremely beautiful young

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woman that Jupiter tries to have an affair with her. Philémon expostulates and in despair the two ask for their original state to be restored to them.

This was contained within the framework of the original one act. In the two-act version, Philémon and Baucis fall asleep as the curtain falls on Act I. Act II is set in a palace which has taken the place of their original poor little house. The attempted seduction commences at this point and leads on to the dénouement. It is obvious that the material is too slight for this extension, and it is still more so in the three-act version. Paris apparently never heard it in one act. Had Gounod left well alone and had the directors of the Opéras Lyrique and Comique seen reason, there is little doubt but that this delightful work would have remained in the repertoire.

It may be that the music is not 'funny'; this does not matter, provided that it balances in substance with the subject, which, in this case, is undeniable. There is considerable poetry in the Introduction and in Baucis's first romance, 'Ah! si je redevenais belle', while Vulcan's song is fittingly and subtly pompous. Is it unkind to say that in this song Vulcan closely resembles Gounod himself in all his pomposity?

Faust has always called forth the ire of the literary fraternity who see in it a prostitution of Goethe. They forget that Goethe himself saw his great play as an opera in 'set' forms. He expressed his wish to Eckermann that someone would undertake it and suggested Meyerbeer. Carré and Barbier who compiled the

libretto for Gounod, were not concerned with the philosophy of the Faust legend. They took certain events and strung them together, slightly incoherently, as a plot. The Marguerite episodes play but one part in the whole, and the two librettists were oblivious to the remainder. They saw the picturesqueness of the idea, which was, of course, mixed with a certain amount of the macabre, although in effect Mephistopheles is not very frightening. At the back of the whole thing was a strong moral which doubtless made its own suitable impression. Was it not of this opera that Lilian Baylis told the story of the early days of the Old Vic when, the performance at an end, she went round the theatre rounding up any of the audience concealed in the auditorium? On entering the gallery she heard a female voice exclaim, 'Nah, then, no muckin' abaht until yer gets the ring on. You 'eard what the gentleman said in the hopery.'

Perhaps it is because the work goes no deeper than this that it has outlived all the other thirty to thirty-five settings of the story, with the exception of Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust*, which even now is only just beginning to establish itself in the musical consciousness of our concert organizers. Wagner's Overture is in a different category, but, nevertheless, it cannot be said to have become 'popular'. The reason is not difficult to find. Gounod's music in *Faust* is attractive and of a melodic quality simple enough to be easy to listen to, while the theatrical qualities are

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in every way perfect. The action moves and never flags. Whenever it is held up for an aria or ensemble movement it is always in the natural course of the plot. The singer is given ample opportunity for display, but there is never any impression that the particular set-piece has been inserted simply to display vocal prowess. Herein lies one of the great differences between the French national expression as shown in *Faust* and that of Meyerbeer and the Italian school, with their vocal and instrumental cadenzas and roulades. Herein also lies the basis for the accusation that Gounod wrote under the influence of Wagner. The outlook is Wagnerian only in so far as the music is more or less continuous, although by no means symphonic (yet Gounod was a symphonic composer). It is inevitable, of course, that the finger of scorn be directed at two movements, the Waltz and, above all, the Soldiers' Chorus—as if soldiers would ever sing anything different from this vulgar type of tune. The Waltz is in the direct line from the Ballroom movement in the *Symphonie Fantastique* and in that of the charming similar movements of Délibes and Lalo.

Let us see how Carré and Barbier, two of the hack librettists, drew attention away from Eugène Scribe, a prolific purveyor of the standard article to most of the foremost composers of the period.

Faust is seated alone in his study, craving for the return of his lost youth. The sound of youth singing outside his window rouses him to action. If Death will not come to him, then he will go to it, but not till

he has tried an experiment. He calls on Mephistopheles and the powers of ill; Mephistopheles appears. Faust hesitates and asks what his visitor can do for him. Mephistopheles promises everything he is asked for, in return for Faust's signature delivering his soul into the hands of Hell. A vision of Marguerite appears. In a frenzy Faust signs the contract and drains a goblet handed him. Instantly he is a young and handsome man again.

A fair is in progress. Valentine, the brother of Marguerite, appears and after commending his sister to the care of a young man, Siebel, sings a cavatina to Marguerite; he is interrupted by the students who are anxious to get on with their festivity. One of them, Wagner, commences a jolly song but is interrupted by Mephistopheles, who taunts Wagner with the simplicity of his song and sings the famous 'Song of the Golden Calf'. This disturbs the crowd, and they are still more upset when Mephistopheles foretells that Wagner will be killed and that every flower touched by Siebel will fade and wither. He is challenged to perform a miracle. This he accomplishes by striking the cask representing the sign of the neighbouring hostelry from which a continuous flow of wine follows. In the riot of excitement Mephistopheles calls for a toast in honour of Marguerite. Valentine immediately challenges him to a duel, but at the first pass Valentine's sword is broken. Realizing that he is dealing with the powers of Evil, Valentine holds up his broken sword, crosswise, and

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the crowd sings an invocation to Good. Mephistopheles recoils, and the crowd slowly withdraws.

Faust comes in, asks if anything is wrong and demands to see Marguerite. Mephistopheles warns him that Marguerite is pure and holy and that Faust will find some difficulty in seducing her. This does not daunt Faust at all. To the strains of the well-known waltz the crowd fills the stage and the fair continues. Marguerite is not among them, and Mephistopheles suggests that there are other equally attractive women at Faust's disposal. Faust, however, is set on Marguerite and no one else. Eventually she appears and Faust accosts her with all the gallantry at his command. Marguerite thanks him, but passes on. The crowd jeers at Faust. With the resumption of the gay waltz, the fair goes on and the curtain falls.

Act III opens outside Marguerite's house. Siebel, who is in love with Marguerite, wants to prepare a posy for her, but remembers that every flower he touches will fade and wither. To his joy he finds that the curse has been removed. He leaves the posy where Marguerite will see it. Faust and Mephistopheles see this simple offering, and the latter says that he has a gift which will far outshine the innocent flowers. Faust is left alone and under the spell of the garden sings an invocation to the little house in which Marguerite lives. Mephistopheles returns with a casket of jewels, but Faust at first rejects his suggestions. Mephistopheles sneers at him and, placing the casket

next to the flowers, withdraws to the back of the garden, while Faust himself stands out of sight.

Marguerite comes from the house, soliloquizing on her adventure, wondering who the handsome man was who spoke to her. She sings quietly to herself, but her thoughts intrude. She sees the flowers, and then the casket. Opening the latter, she is amazed at the sight of the jewels and puts them on, singing the famous Jewel Song. Her chaperone, Martha, comes to find her and is spellbound at the beautiful picture Marguerite makes. However, this is but the first step to the seduction. Mephistopheles steps forward and takes Martha on his arm. Martha cannot resist the handsome stranger, and when he tells her that her husband has been killed in the wars, she does not mind in the slightest. Faust approaches Marguerite, who this time does not repel him. She tells him that she is an orphan—meanwhile Mephistopheles has got Martha almost swooning with delight.

Siebel enters, determined to declare his boyish love for Marguerite, but he is sent away by Martha, who does not want her pleasure interrupted. Mephistopheles, finding that Martha is taking him too seriously, sings an invocation to night that it will surround the house with darkness and peace.

By this time Marguerite has fallen under Faust's spell. Then follows the understood seduction.

The next day Marguerite sits at her spinning-wheel, wondering if she will ever see Faust again. Siebel appears and asks why Marguerite is in tears. He may

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be young but he clearly understands what has happened. Marguerite is perfectly certain that Faust really loves her, but she mistrusts the dark figure who always accompanies him. Siebel sings of his own youthful love and Marguerite goes out in tears. Martha hurries in with the news that Valentine has arrived, and immediately we hear the singing of the crowds and soldiers who have returned from the war (not a very long one, evidently). Valentine asks Siebel where Marguerite is and is told that she is in church. The soldiers sing their well-known chorus. The truth dawns on Valentine, who has slowly wormed certain facts from Siebel. Mephistopheles and Faust come in, the latter downcast and conscience-stricken. Faust declares that he still loves Marguerite, and this rouses the scorn of his friend. Sardonicly Mephistopheles sings a serenade to Marguerite.

Valentine interrupts him and asks whom he is serenading. Realizing that it is Marguerite, he draws his sword and challenges Faust. They fight. Mephistopheles strikes up Valentine's sword, and Faust runs him through. Falling to the ground, mortally wounded, he sees Marguerite running towards him. She begs his forgiveness, but he curses her as a harlot, and dies.

The next scene shows Marguerite in the church, praying Heaven for forgiveness. Her prayer is interrupted by Mephistopheles and his demons, the former appearing dramatically from a tomb. Mephistopheles claims her for her sin.

She has murdered her child (this is implied) and is thrown into prison. Faust visits her, being let into the prison by Mephistopheles. Faust tries to dismiss the Devil, but he has signed a contract and his release will not be granted. Faust implores Marguerite to flee with him. She has lost her reason and does not understand what Faust is saying. Day approaches, and Mephistopheles is impatient. Either Faust must persuade Marguerite to come with him or he must leave her. Marguerite begs once more for forgiveness, and her prayer is answered. The sound of angels singing fills the cell. Her soul ascends to Heaven as Mephistopheles drags off Faust to damnation.

This libretto contains all the operatic conventions. Much is left to the imagination, naturally, and although it is all perfectly obvious in the reading, it seems a little incoherent in performance. Wagner, for example, who plays a prominent part in Goethe's drama, fades away after the second act—but it is presumed that in his case Mephistopheles' prophecy came true and he was killed. The fact that the war was so short signifies nothing as opera takes no account of actual time. Siebel forms the conventional foil against evil love, but in this case it is of a very cold and harmless nature. The character is not drawn sympathetically, while no reason is given for the prophecy's failure. This, again, is a characteristic of the opera-book in that it shows the powers of Evil as harmless against Innocence.

Nevertheless this is opera as it was understood at

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the time and its conventions die very hard. The traditional Mephistopheles in cloak and sword, pointed beard and cap with feather, is drawn in such a way that it depends entirely on the acting abilities of the singer as to whether he is absurd or menacing. Mr Ernest Newman rightly suggested that it would have been nearer the point if, on his entrance, Mephistopheles had asked, 'Are you amused?' instead of 'Are you afraid?' This is the natural outlook of a point of view which sees evil in terms of ugliness; to succeed, the devil must be as attractive as possible to the person he wishes to deceive. Meyerbeer would have made mountains out of this character, and here we can see the difference between his style and that of Gounod. Meyerbeer would have given Mephistopheles a long introductory aria with appropriate vocal flourishes, for which Scribe automatically would have written a suitable text. Gounod changed all that kind of thing by letting the character introduce himself in the ordinary nature of his appearance. In this way the action is not unnecessarily held up.

Musically, *Faust* is as dramatic as could be wished. The various points are made unmistakably, but there are the two Gounods at work. The one Gounod had the dramatic force of the church scene and the sense of distance of that in the garden; the other lapsed into *cantabile* melody of considerable conjunctivity, but could not avoid the sentimentality which the use of sequence emphasized. The two Gounods combined in the crowd scenes, which live and sparkle,

and in the orchestration, which is masterly. There is a lack of variety in the melodic lines which is stressed by a similar lack in the harmony. Rhythmically, such things as the Waltz and the Calf of Gold are superb. The latter found its echo in Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*, which is a good opposite number to Gounod's *Faust*. Gounod's early contrapuntal training is marked in those places which call for ensemble music. Clarity—that is the hall-mark of all French music down to the present day. One thing at a time, avoiding all complexities, seems to have been the aim of French composers—a preoccupation which has earned them a reputation for being poor contrapuntists.

The two Gounods' war against each other in certain places, as, for example, the Introduction (there is no overture), where the atmosphere of horror and gloom is admirably expressed [Ex. 1] until the theme of Valentine's song, 'Ev'n the bravest heart may swell' [Ex. 2] dispels the entire feeling. Gounod's intention is obvious. He wished to draw the distinction between the sinister character of Faust and the purity of Marguerite. Unfortunately the introduction of this tune disturbs the ear, which has to make a return to the prevailing mood—but, and here is an important point, we know in that short space exactly what the opera is concerned with.

Reading the score after many years of not thinking about it and of having come to regard it somewhat superciliously, one is forced by its obvious dramatic

Ex. 1.

Adagio molto

First system of musical notation. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The time signature is common time (C). The music is written for piano (p) and features a forte (ff) dynamic marking. The melody is in the right hand, and the bass line is in the left hand. The piece begins with a half rest in the right hand and a half note in the left hand, followed by a series of chords and single notes.

Second system of musical notation. The melody continues in the right hand with a series of chords and single notes. The bass line continues with a series of chords and single notes. The piece ends with a double bar line.

2

Third system of musical notation. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The time signature is common time (C). The music is written for piano (p) and features a series of triplets in the left hand. The melody is in the right hand, and the bass line is in the left hand. The piece begins with a half rest in the right hand and a half note in the left hand, followed by a series of chords and single notes.

Fourth system of musical notation. The melody continues in the right hand with a series of chords and single notes. The bass line continues with a series of chords and single notes. The piece ends with a double bar line.

power to an added respect. What if the Waltz be hackneyed? What if the Soldiers' Chorus be vulgar and commonplace? What if the sentimental tunes are, well, sentimental? Nothing can detract from the vivid sense of the theatre shown in the garden scene and the feeling of dramatic pathos in the church and prison. That Faust addresses Marguerite's house in terms of an oratorio, in the aria 'All hail, thou dwelling pure and holy', does not remove its beauty as a tune of its kind, neither does it sound unfitting. 'Ev'n the bravest heart may swell' falls below it in quality because of the accompaniment, which consists largely of repeated chords; but this was a characteristic of the period, and in considering music of past ages, this must be taken into account. At any rate, it is largely to these two tunes that the opera owes its popularity not only among listeners but also among singers. The latter are thus in the picture all the time. They feel that they are acting an integral part of the work. That is why or partly why the world's greatest singers have delighted in *Faust*, which, not giving them deliberately flowered music to sing, affords them every opportunity within the scope of the opera.

Unfortunately, it has given this opportunity in the past to singers whose personal appearance has belied the characters they are portraying. The old-fashioned prima donna was chosen for her voice, not her appearance, and the operatic stage of tradition has shown us far too many portly Marguerites whose innocence cannot possibly be convincing. This is the origin of

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the saying that 'opera is all right until you look at it'. Nowadays we are enlightened. We consider opera as a whole and not simply as a vehicle for singing. That is also why opera 'books' have rarely been good dramatic literature, and anyone with a sense of the theatre has been able to concoct them. Today we expect more than this, and an irreverent age cannot take seriously a soprano fair, fat and fifty maintaining, as in the case of *Madame Butterfly* of Puccini, that she is seventeen; and this is all to the good. We may, perhaps, tolerate a buxom Brünhilde, for she is an Amazon, but we cannot tolerate an unwieldy Marguerite or any other similar heroine.

Opera singers are not always good actors. Unless Mephistopheles is one, he becomes ludicrous. Here are opportunities for acting, if perhaps ham-acting, but at least it must be acted to be convincing. It takes a Pol Plançon to thrill us in this role. Pol Plançon with his magnificent stage appearance and resonant voice was able to get the right touch of cynical sarcasm in the Serenade to Marguerite and could act all the time as if Faust's soul were a matter of personal moment to himself.

The ballet, which is intended to appear before Act V, needs some explanation, for this was a great and indisputable feature of French opera; the failure of *Tannhäuser* was entirely due to the fact that what little ballet or dancing there was came right at the beginning of the work instead of the usual place. Ballet fans in the persons of the Jockey Club were

not interested in opera, but were solely concerned with seeing their favourite ballerinas; they demanded their rights, and it was the custom of the Paris Opéra to please all its patrons. The ballet had box-office returns to justify it, but it gave the singers a welcome respite from their wrestling with the orchestra. The action of the opera, therefore, ceased for a short while. Sometimes the ballet had some bearing on the work, and an astute composer endeavoured to include it as part of the work; at other times it was fitted in, and so inconsequent was it considered that the music was often taken from another work. In those days the ballet audiences were not attracted by the music and scarcely gave it an ear. Composers, therefore, hesitated at writing what would probably pass practically unnoticed, even if designed to give the dancers every opportunity.

Gounod, however, composed original music, and the ballet was given connection with the opera in a rather far-fetched manner. Mephistopheles and Faust ride through the past ages during the Walpurgis Night revels and meet the world's greatest courtesans, none of whom seems to have had any of the remorse which comes over Marguerite. This simple-minded and innocent girl therefore was forced to compete with Cleopatra and the Queen of Sheba. Unfortunately Gounod made no attempt at characterization. Cleopatra dances to strains as innocuous as those given to the Queen of Sheba, and a ballet of Sunday school teachers would be almost riotous in

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comparison; but this did not matter, because it was the tinkly-tinkly tunes that the ballet-goer who was not watching a full-scale work required. The ballet in this country was often omitted, but when included it was described on the posters as *Faust—with Full Ballet*. In these days of ballet sophistication, when it has become possible to write books about it with but the slenderest knowledge, it might well bring a smile to the faces of the onlookers and hearers; yet I doubt it, because there is now the adulation given to dancers, regardless of what they are dancing, which used to be given to singers, regardless of what they were singing. In the ballet music of *Faust* there is a splendid waltz which is more danceable than the one in the opera, and less singable.

Faust, therefore, is a magnificent example of a great genre which has changed only slightly in its principles. Exactly how it was that Gounod managed to score this long-lived success is difficult to determine. For what it is worth we quote a criticism which appeared in a book published in 1872 called *Musical Recollections of the last Half-century*, written by the Rev. John Edmund Cox, who seems to have been an avid music lover:

To this hour I maintain that from beginning to end the *Faust* is nothing more than a delightful piece of musical mosaic, dovetailed together from the compositions of every class of musical composer, right and left, but with so much ingenuity that it presents especially in the 'garden scene', a perfect picture, brimful of beauty, although

somewhat overloaded with a profusion of melody that is at times all but cloying to the senses. It would be impossible to say how many times I have heard the *Faust* since its first production at Her Majesty's Theatre, but rarely have I been disappointed with it, although I have never failed to detect fresh plagiarisms which, although distinct enough, may be forgiven on account of the admirable manner in which they have been utilized.

In other words, Gounod cribbed it all, but never mind; he cribbed it so nicely. . . . Paul Dukas described this kind of detective work as a sign of musical cretinism.

Faust stands in relation to the opera of its time rather as *Der Rosenkavalier* stands to today. Both are works of cultural individuality which present their origin in no uncertain light. *Faust* is as essentially French as *Der Rosenkavalier* is Viennese.

It is interesting to recall the record of *Faust* in terms of performances for the first thirty-five years of its existence. At the Théâtre Lyrique it was played fifty-eight times in 1859. At the Nouveau Lyrique on the Place du Châtelet it rose to two hundred and forty-two, while the Théâtre de la Renaissance (Salle Ventadour) performed it eight times. It reached its five hundredth performance on 4th November 1887 at the Opéra, and its thousandth on 14th December 1894. Its largest takings were 760,590 francs in one year, but this was at the end of the last century. Nevertheless, it still shows higher box-office returns than any other work.

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(c) ROMÉO ET JULIETTE

Mr Eric Blom devotes four columns and a half in *Everyman's Dictionary of Music* to a list of composers who have set Shakespeare in some form of another, of which thirteen composers are mentioned as having written operas on *Romeo and Juliet*, in addition to incidental music for productions, symphonic poems, overtures and songs. Carré and Barbier once again provided the book for Gounod, which they founded entirely upon the play with the exception of Stephano, page to Roméo, who tries to put things right. He was invented to balance with Siebel in *Faust*.

This opera has always been better appreciated by singers than by musicians, especially in France, although it is not a long time ago since it was in the repertoire (such as that was) in this country. It was written with an eye and ear for singers, and while it would be wrong to say that virtuosic vocal display seems to have been the entire purpose, there is more *bravura* writing than in *Faust*. Nevertheless, this writing is again within the context. Of this work only the Waltz Song remains, which is sung by Juliette in the first act. Gounod approached the realms of 'Grand Opera' in this work. The exact meaning of the term has never been finally decided, but it seems to apply to those works in which the attraction is centred on the voices and personalities of the greatest singers of both sexes rather than upon the music itself which,

so far as the majority of those in the audience were concerned, might be *any* opera. The audience goes to hear the singing and nothing else, for which occasion it decks itself up (or used to do so) in its richest raiment, and the Press gives the names of all those present who, surprisingly enough, leave cards with the attendants. 'Grand Opera' which used to be synonymous with 'Gala Nights' is, we hope, a thing of the past, for artistically (if we consider it from every angle) it left a lot to be desired. Musicians were conspicuous by their absence on these occasions. Queen Victoria thought nothing of turning up in the middle of an act, which meant that the proceedings had to be held up while the National Anthem was played. For this purpose *Roméo et Juliette* was an excellent work. The music was unobtrusive, and the opera contained arias for everybody and none could say that any one was more vocally demonstrative than any other. For once, therefore, all the singers were satisfied. As for the interruption, the entire cast appeared on the stage, made its bow, and then retired till its next entrance. This period is often referred to as 'the palmy days of opera'. One may be thankful that one was either too young to understand or not alive during it.

Roméo et Juliette, however, has another claim to fame, for according to the story, Juliette, in the person of Adelina Patti, on one occasion gave Roméo (Nicolini) twenty-nine real kisses from the balcony. They were married shortly afterwards.

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This work allowed Gounod every opportunity for the exercise of his melodic gifts, and a study of the score shows them both at their best and worst. One of the troubles with Gounod's music is that it lacks variety. As a writer has truly said, all Gounod's lovers make love to the same tune, which means that the lines follow each other in their construction. However, this did not matter in *Roméo et Juliette* because it marked an attempt to combine tradition and the new idea, which nevertheless seemed to cast a glance of regret at the fading of an established form, and is not without a certain self-consciousness. It must be remembered that Gounod had at last scored a success with *Faust* after a succession of failures. To have written *Roméo et Juliette* on the same lines would have been to court disaster, because the two works would have resembled each other too closely. Is he to be blamed for taking the line of least resistance, of trying to keep himself in the swim of popularity by flirting with what he knew his audiences would like? It is all a point of view, and there is no doubt as to what the 'art for art's sake' believer will think. In any case Gounod succeeded in the end and from his own point of view the end must have justified the means. Fortunately, it did not set a fashion.

Mireille was a success because it was exciting, spectacular up to a point and emotional—the very characteristics of *Faust*, in fact. The book was drawn from the poem of Frédéric Mistral by Carré, without the assistance of Barbier. It deals with the

oft-repeated struggles of a girl to marry the man she loves against the will of her father, who has other views. However, trite though this seems, Carré made use of all the intrigues drawn in the original poem, but provided an alternative ending. It is worth going into the details of this libretto because it shows at a glance exactly what the elements were which in those days made for success, and also how it drew a happy medium between *opéra-comique* and opera on the larger scale. It will be seen that *Mireille* is everything that it ought to be. That it is no longer in the limited repertoire in this country is probably due to its being a happy medium and neither the one nor the other. Besides, Gounod is, as I have said, the composer of *Faust*.

The work opens in a mulberry plantation. The village girls are picking the fruit. The girls attract Taven, the sorceress of the 'Valley of Hell'. They consult her about their love affairs. Mireille, the daughter of Ramon (a rich farmer) is in love with Vincent (a basket maker). Ramon wishes her to marry Ourrias (a drover). Mireille asks Taven for her advice. Taven warns her of approaching difficulties and dangers and advises her to make an offering in the church of SS. Maries-de-la-Mer when in difficulties. Vincent enters and renews his love-approaches to Mireille.

In Act II we are at a fête and the villagers are singing and dancing a farandole. Mireille and Vincent are there. Mireille approaches Taven and learns from her that there are three claimants to her hand:

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Ourrias, Alari and Pascoul; they have decided to leave the decision to Ramon. Ourrias enters and also renews his love approaches to Mireille, who makes an evasive answer and goes out laughing. Ourrias complains to Ramon about the treatment he has received. At that moment Vincent comes in to make his formal request of Ramon, being persuaded to do this by his father and sister. He is told to be about his business. Mireille overhears this and declares that Vincent alone is the man she wants. Ramon flies into a rage and threatens him. Ourrias simply looks at Vincent with eyes of jealousy and Mireille is carried out in her father's arms, fainting.

In Act III Ourrias consults Taven and meets Vincent, bent on the same errand. They fight, and Ourrias kills Vincent, who in true operatic fashion is restored to life by Taven, unknown to Ourrias, who is next seen in a barge on the Rhône, struck with remorse and haunted by funereal ghosts. The barge capsizes, and sinks to the bottom of the river with Ourrias.

Some time later Mireille, sad and despondent, is serving the retainers of Ramon with their evening meal. In due course everyone retires to bed. Vincent's sister glides into Mireille's room and tells her what has happened to Vincent. Mireille decides that this is the time to make her supplication in the church. She traverses the plains of Crau with her head bared to the sun. A shepherd warns her of the dangers of this exposure. Mireille is very lonely and anxious to reach

the church quickly. She arrives at the same time as a procession of pilgrims. Vincent also appears, and Mireille falls into his arms. Her father, his father and sister and Taven come in, Ramon at last giving his consent to the marriage. It is too late and, holding out her arms to the saints, Mireille dies.

In order to conform with the 'happy ending' rule for *opéra-comique*, an alternative final tableau was written in which Mireille is happily married to Vincent, and they all, apparently, live happily ever after.

This basis of the unreasonable father can be found in several operas, notably in Charpentier's *Louise*, and was a popular characteristic of this type of romantic opera. The book of *Mireille* will be seen to be typically operatic and inconsistent, and in one matter, unique. The arrival of the several characters just in the nick of time is all in the tradition. It may be argued that if Vincent's sister, apparently in the form of a spirit-dream, tells Mireille of her brother's situation, Mireille has nothing further to worry about, especially since Ourrias is dead. We are not told whether it was a dream or whether somehow or other the sister made an operatic appearance through the window. The unique feature is that for once we have a sorceress and witch who is not evil. Taven, therefore, occupies a solitary position in operatic literature, as far as can be ascertained. The sad ending made an instant appeal to the sentimental and romantic feelings of the public. Those who liked to weep were satisfied at the sight of true and faithful

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love frustrated, while the others rejoiced at the happy fulfilment of fidelity. These are the points which made for its popularity in the first place. It was the immediate precursor of the opera-type of Massenet, whose works all contain this firm stratum of sentimentalism, but are not necessarily bad for that reason.

Gounod failed where Massenet succeeded, and that was in the melody. The quality of Gounod in the light of later events is less distinctive than that of Massenet. Gounod was too much the symphonist at heart to give his melodic lines any of that particular sweetness which characterizes those of Massenet. The listener can always leave the theatre humming a Massenet melody; those of Gounod pass over his head. Each quality, however, has its value and position in the scheme of things. Gounod does not cloy; Massenet often clings like nougat to the teeth. It is indeed one of the glories of Gounod that he sired a school of opera as individual in its maturity as that of Wagner. The difference is only that of degree. Unlike Saint-Saëns, Gounod and Massenet are absolutely French and have no foundation in anything foreign to that culture. So many of Saint-Saëns' works might have been written by one of many tenth-rate German composers of the last century, but neither of the other two lays himself open to this doubt. I repeat, one may not like it, but there it is.

One part of opera must be discussed, however, because it has always laid itself open to criticism and

heartly laughter, and that is the libretto. Very, very few libretti up to the time of Wagner and Boito have been of high literary quality. It may be wondered at, perhaps, but the reason is not difficult to find. In the first place, no serious dramatist wants his play given the addition of music unless particularly stipulated for in the play itself. The writers of libretti have been specialists in the art of producing texts for music, and only for music. These have usually been in some kind of verse and it takes a Shakespeare to accomplish this in a manner satisfactory to all. (I am not exaggerating. How many other plays written in verse are in the regular repertoire?) The chances of the words being distinct from start to finish are comparatively few, and therefore the librettists have not been very seriously concerned with the quality of their writings. As long as the mould fitted the purpose, that was all they cared about or, indeed, had to care about.

In recent times an attempt has been made to give composers texts of real literary value, with the idea of placing them on the level of the music. There is no doubt that a finely written libretto inspires the composer more than one upon which he merely hangs his music; but there is a school of thought which disapproves of this high standard because it feels that in this case the book would be good enough to stand on its own merits without the music. Otherwise Shakespeare would surely be an excellent field for operatic composers.

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There is the question of using an already written play. Cases in point of this may be mentioned—Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* and Franc-Nohain's *L'Heure Espagnole*, for example—both plays which stand on their own legs. Some composers have written their own libretti and it is a matter of opinion as to whether or not Wagner was the great dramatic poet that he considered himself to be and whether he had a real sense of the theatre, or at any rate the operatic theatre. The shining example of complete success is Vincent d'Indy, who wrote the texts of his three great operas.

It would be a case of gilding the lily. While it is difficult to think of any opera which has been killed by the excellence of its libretto, there are hundreds (and Gounod's failures are among them) which have been doomed from the start by the pooriness of the texts; and this seems to point to the fact that librettists are wanted (and no doubt they exist) who can draw the dividing line between pure drama and opera.

In the last century, and even earlier, this was not the case: Quinault, Scribe, Carré and Barbier—these are the names of the great specialist librettists whose work in our present-day judgement ranks with the highest hack achievements of all ages.

This digression is necessary to show how in one respect feeble texts can help in the failure of an opera, and Gounod suffered accordingly. His apparent lack of literary judgement was nothing uncommon among

the musicians of the period; but we know Gounod to have been a man of wide culture and we must put it down to the fashion prevalent in his day (the using of the universal providers of libretti), that he exercised so little discrimination.

Mention must be made here of the theatre music which was highly approved by Hector Berlioz. Writing to Gounod apropos the music to Ponsard's drama *Ulysse*, which was written for chorus and orchestra, Berlioz expressed the opinion that the music alone should make repetition of the play essential, particularly the Banqueting Chorus for double choir.

*Chapter III**THE CHURCH MUSIC*

GOUNOD'S church music may be divided into three classes, the Masses in which he could not get away from the tawdry and garish aspects of the Roman ritual, the short anthems and sacred songs directly suggested by his stay in England, and the cantatas and big choral works, the latter of which he considered his greatest achievements.

The Masses, of which the 'Benedictus' from the *Messe Solennelle* is occasionally used as an anthem, show the worst side of his mysticism, which appears to have been of an enervating, sickly sentimental type. During the periods of his intense belief he compares unfavourably with the firm faith of Bach and Franck, who approached their Maker with boldness and looked Him in the face. Gounod perpetually whined and snivelled. This may be a purely personal matter, but in most creative artists it plays a direct part in their work. Without placing the two works alongside for comparative reasons, the *Mass in B minor* clearly shows the difference between the outlook of the righteous and possibly rather dull Bach and that of the worldly Gounod. The beauty of Bach lies in his simplicity, that of Gounod (where it can be detected) lies in his saccharine quality which brings tears to the eyes because of its very sensuality and sweetness.

Better in every way are the short anthems which by reason of their brevity have little opportunity for sentimental moralizing. 'Send out Thy Light' may be breathless in performance, but its vocal writing is admirably singable, and small choirs could find many worse things of its kind. 'Come unto Him' is beautiful but 'Oh, come near to the Cross' falls into the old mysticism. The sacred songs are regrettable but typical of their period. 'O Divine Redeemer' and the little known 'The Lord is my Shepherd' were the result of a publishing enterprise by two enthusiastic music lovers who sought to establish their catalogue by inviting the leading composer of Europe, and one whose reputation in this country was higher than that of any other, to head their list. For the former song they paid one hundred pounds, an enormous sum in those days, and the outlay was completely justified. For years and years this song appeared in organ recital programmes in churches both large and small. The latter, like so many sequels, failed.

The most widely used of these sacred works was undoubtedly 'Nazareth', which falls between the carol and the anthem. Its appeal is understandable if one remembers its period. It is melodically in the line of Mendelssohn plus a typically Gounod sugariness. It is a pretty tune and the fact that it has no bearing whatsoever on the words or on their spirit has never seemed to bother anyone. It is an ecclesiastical waltz of the worst kind and its popularity almost killed the traditional English carol which was in process

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of revival under the misguided hands of Sir John Stainer and Sir Joseph Barnby. However, this was the kind of thing which stood for church music in those days.

For completeness' sake we must mention the dreadful 'Ave Maria', which consists of a tune by Gounod superimposed on the first Prelude of the 'Forty-eight'. This has been arranged for many combinations of instruments, the most appealing (in the truest sense of the word) always including an organ or harmonium harmonic support of the arpeggii. This gives it a dim religious background which by its emotional effect is said to call the sinner to repentance.

The larger choral works are correspondingly good and bad. *Gallia*, a short cantata representative of Gounod's feelings for his country when he escaped the Franco-Prussian war by coming over here, lacks dignity, but in places has some genuine pathos. The chorus 'Is it nothing to you?' has a ring of sincerity about it. The final chorus uses the Mendelssohn repeated-chord with considerable purpose, but because of this particular usage it loses all individuality. It may be mentioned that although the work was written ostensibly for the Exhibition of 1871, it served to remove some opprobrium from Gounod, who was accused in his absence of running away from his country in her time of peril. Gounod refuted the charge by saying that *Gallia* proved his country to have been uppermost in his mind all the time.

Church choirs of modest dimensions and ability

used to find this work useful in penitential seasons as the words with their Scriptural origin could be applied to Holy Week, and cantatas suitable for this occasion were then hard to find. The deficiency was well and truly made up later on.

An abortive 'sacred drama' called *Tobias*, according to the contemporary criticism, had the effect of sending the audience literally to sleep on its one and only performance here.

An interesting large-scale choral work which we have not heard as yet is a dramatic diptych *The Ecstatic Contemplation of St Francis at the foot of the Cross and the Death of St Francis*. It was performed on 27th and 28th March 1891 at the *Concert spirituel*, and according to the criticisms seems to have been a success, particularly the Symphonic Interlude which with 'its melody on the violins sustained by harps and organ was much applauded'—so we may hazard a guess at the kind of thing it was.

The two big choral works, however, demand some detailed consideration, not only because Gounod himself mentally genuflected when he mentioned or thought of them, but because they show exactly how fashion can change what was once nearly an ultra-modern expression and also to what extent a composer can be deceived in himself.

In *The Redemption* and *Mors et Vita* Gounod betrays his whole outlook and personality before ever a note is played. Composers who issue apologia for

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their works usually say too much or claim too much for their music. It was sufficient that Gounod should have laid what he felt to be his greatest works on the altar of God. In the introduction to *The Redemption* (and there is no harm in the composer explaining the layout of his work if he thinks it necessary) Gounod goes further. He had one besetting sin; he was a snob. *The Redemption* may have been 'a sacred trilogy', but there was no heavenly reason for printing 'To Her Most Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria This Work is, with the gracious permission of Her Majesty, humbly dedicated by her Majesty's Most Devoted and Humble Servant Charles Gounod.' This spoils it. Similarly, *Mors et Vita* bears a dedication 'A Sa Sainteté Le Pape Leon XIII' and the preface finishes with the paragraph 'It only remains for me to lay the respectful homage of my veneration and profound gratitude at the feet of the eminent Pontiff, his Holiness Pope Leo XIII, who has done me the supreme honour of accepting the dedication of a work of which the highest claim to distinction will be to have it placed under such patronage.'

Mors et Vita was intended to be the continuation of Gounod's sacred trilogy. He did not write the third part, and conjecture is rife as to who would have been the lucky recipient of the dedication. In any case the situation is a trifle muddled as *The Redemption* is described as a trilogy in itself; but it was conceived in 1867 and finished twelve years later, being first performed at the Birmingham Festival of 1882.

Mors et Vita was not completed until 1885, and therefore it and its unwritten sequel were after-thoughts in the scheme.

The Redemption was intended as complimentary to Massenet's *Marie Madeleine*, a sacred work of some proportions which roused the ire of Vincent d'Indy, who was disgusted to find that Massenet had written a particularly beautiful aria for Mary with 'his tongue in his cheek'. Other works of a similar calibre and nature were Franck's *Rédemption* and *Les Béatitudes*. Gounod referred to *The Redemption* as 'l'ouvrage de ma vie'. Writing in the *Musical Opinion* of June 1883 the critic said that 'Gounod's attempts at choral writing are of the most humble description, resembling brief "part-songs", and without the slightest address in the march of the inner parts'. He also described the work as a whole as 'one of dull monotony'. He of the *Monthly Musical Record* assessed Gounod's sacred music in general as 'a mixture of the old ecclesiastical style with that of his *Faust*'. Both these are far-fetched. Gounod was too good a contrapuntist to ignore the 'march of the inner parts', and there are many instances of fugato in the two works, and fugato writing of a scholarly nature, although it is true that for the most part he wrote harmonically. The second criticism, written in 1870, we beg to doubt, as at that time the really old ecclesiastical style was by no means familiar in this country and the only composers who could have been at all well known were people like Boyce and the cathedral

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school, with whom Gounod had the least possible affinity.

No matter how much one may dislike and possibly deplore the universal sentimentality and theatrical meretriciousness of Gounod's sacred works, one cannot deny his mastery of pure choral writing and his use of emotional harmonic progression. This he had imbibed in his youth when he studied the really old composers, and returned from Italy with a knowledge, almost unique at that time, of Palestrina. It is the contradictory elements of Gounod's life and personality which have prejudiced opinion against him, together with his particular brand of religious mysticism which a race basically not Roman Catholic finds nauseating and flaccid; but substance must be separated from quality, and taste from judgement.

The Redemption opens with a Prologue, and its three main parts are concerned with the Condemnation and Crucifixion of Christ, the Resurrection and Ascension, and the Pentecostal visitation in the Acts of the Apostles. The prologue is concerned with the Creation, and the opening orchestral introduction ranks with that of Haydn in being neither more nor less chaotic. Man is created; he is tempted and falls; but Redemption is promised in the form of the Son of God.

It is unnecessary to go through the three main parts in detail as the events are well known. Gounod uses a guiding theme which appears unchanged throughout the work. It is a negative tune and could

apply to anything, but at least it keeps a kind of grip and cohesion. There is a March to Calvary which has its impressive minutes, not the least being the use of the 'Vexilla Regis' in unison which, after all, is not of Gounod's composing. It is a bold composer who tries to compete with John Sebastian Bach in the delineation of the Crucifixion, and to work on as broad a canvas. Gounod's strong dramatic feeling helped him considerably, and the scene of darkness is impressive and convincing; but he fails in the commentary on the words of Christ where he lapses into the usual sugar and water sentiment. He, too, uses chorales, but instead of taking some traditional melody, he composes his own, harmonized in the tradition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. We remember the variety of Bach's settings of these chorales and we make comparison only because Gounod himself placed his *The Redemption* on as high a level as the *Passions*. Let us remember that many in this country had had little opportunity of hearing either of the Bach *Passions* and, therefore, took Gounod as the standard.

As long as the story is graphic, Gounod nearly succeeds in rising to the required heights, but the sentiment of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is too much for him, and the solo setting of the words 'While my watch I am keeping' duly followed by a choral repetition with the personal pronoun altered is mawkish to a degree.

Part II contains two choruses which for many

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years appeared in service lists of churches which should have known better. 'From Thy love as a Father', however, has some value for its simplicity; it comes near Mendelssohn, and does not quite sink to the depths of sentiment of such a thing as 'I waited for the Lord' in the *Hymn of Praise*. In this respect it is superior to Mendelssohn, but equals him at the final plagal cadence where the penultimate chord of B flat is turned into B flat minor. The other movement is the triumphantly vulgar chorus 'Unfold, ye portals' where trumpet fanfares on the common chord compete with the efforts of the chorus to make a joyful if empty noise. Let us be fair. We are viewing this work in 1950. In 1867-82 this was how they did things. The listener of that day found himself greatly stirred by this kind of writing. It was the transitional period from negativism to positivism, when effect lay in the march of the music rather than in the tone colour. Trumpets stood for fanfares, *ergo* fanfares stood for triumph of every kind. The music had to underline the text; the idea of letting the words speak for themselves had not yet been accepted, although Franck in *Les Béatitudes* had made a strong appeal for it.

Part III has some swinging tunes which are a little out of place. It again has all the Mendelssohn sweetness but a little more strength this time. The fact that its opening shape is curiously akin to that of the Introduction to Haydn's symphony *Mit dem Paukenwirbel* was undoubtedly unintentional. Mendelssohn

might indeed have written the first chorus, 'Lovely appear over the mountains' [Ex. 3] especially the soprano solo, 'In this age truly blest', with its harp arpeggii and sustained woodwind chords [Ex. 4]. The unfitness of things is seen at the narration of 'At

3

Love - ly ap - pear o - ver the

moun - tains the feet of them that preach

night the Spirit came upon them', which it does *alla marcia* for the most part. The 'Hymn of the Apostles' in 6/4 time has one of those unison tunes which reek of evangelization. The quartet 'They are blessed, the poor in spirit' is strongly tinged with Stainer-Dykes-and-Barnby in its four-square pedantic harmony, and Gounod had to show his contrapuntal training with a long fugue with figured accompaniment, a

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convention of the period. The work ends on a note of triumph emphasized by strong modulations in

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The musical score consists of two systems, each with a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The vocal line is in a 2/4 time signature. The piano accompaniment features a continuous eighth-note pattern in the left hand and chords in the right hand.

System 1:

- Vocal line: In. this age tru - ly blest more than
- Piano accompaniment: Treble clef has a whole note chord. Bass clef has eighth-note patterns.

System 2:

- Vocal line: a - ges pre - ced - ing shall the corn ne-ver fail
- Piano accompaniment: Treble clef has a whole note chord. Bass clef has eighth-note patterns.

reiterated chords. The weakest things are the descending semi-toned solos which become wearisome.

For Gounod, this work meant an attainment of spiritual outpouring in which he humbly laid his gifts

on the altar. It was a pity, as I have said, knowing his view of the work, that he dedicated it to Queen Victoria. One thinks of Elgar's simple 'A.M.D.G.'

Mors et Vita has all the negative qualities which *The Redemption* lacks. It is pretentious and dull, and its only saving graces are some of the orchestral interludes. It is written to a Latin text. In the preface Gounod says that he 'does not wish to expose himself to the reproach either of pretension or of subtlety'. No one could here accuse him of the latter. The work, again, is in three parts with prologue, and opens with a short commentary on death and subsequent resurrection. A section called 'Requiem' follows, but it is not on the lines of the Requiem Mass. Part II, 'The Judgement', is in itself in three parts, 'The Sleep of the Dead', 'The Judgement of the Elect', 'The Judgement of the Rejected', while Part III, 'Life', is the 'Vision of St John'. This is the kind of book which requires a Berlioz to do it justice, and in some ways we can see Gounod aiming at a refined expression of the Berlioz technique and approach which naturally fails because a refined Berlioz with all the effect reduced becomes a dull thing indeed. In a double chorus, 'A custodia matutina usque ad noctem', Gounod shows a certain mastery of choral writing even if it is not in eight real parts for long. It is in this type of unpretentious music that Gounod shows his musical upbringing. Chromaticism blurs many pages of *Mors et Vita*, particularly in the Duo 'Quaerens me, sedisti', which might have been written

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by Spohr. Nevertheless, the choral writing is impeccable throughout; it is only the type of music which upsets one.

Of the orchestral interludes the worst is 'Judex', which strives after nobility but succeeds in being simply banal. The best is the Prelude to Part II, which succeeds because of its simplicity. There is not very much awe in the 'Tubae ad ultimum judicium'—what would Berlioz have done here?—but the opening of the last part, the 'Vision of St John', is effective in a theatrical kind of way.

The whole trouble about the work is that it was too big for Gounod, and he attempted to put too much into it. He was not so much out of his depth in *The Redemption*, because there is a story going right through, but confronted by the majesty of death and resurrection, his technique and mentality were too limited.

There is probably no future for these works. They are redolent of a Victorianism whose outlook can never be revived. It was an age of spaciousness of time, when life was slow and steady. Composers could take their thoughts to an unlimited degree and the longer they made them and the more they expanded them, the higher went their reputation. It is a pity that such a splendid vocal technique should have been allied to such a weak musical technique. Probably choirs could almost sight-read these works to-day. They offer no difficulties of attack or intonation and the harmony always does exactly what

might be expected of it. The balance is invariably good, but orchestral players might well complain that they are dragging heavy wagons behind them. In an age of tinsel the works reigned supreme. It would have been better if they had had some connection with the age of superstition. Both fall a long way below Berlioz' *L'Enfance de Christ*; and although theatrical in many respects, they are more restrained than Berlioz, but more meretricious. Even with all their faults they cannot be despised because they suggested a type of music to composers which resulted in a plethora of cantatas which at least gave choirs and choral societies something more ambitious than the part-song or anthem.

*Chapter IV**THE MISCELLANEOUS WORKS*

ALTHOUGH Gounod's songs have long since disappeared from our concert programmes, they are not without considerable merit, apart from their historical position. They demonstrate his peculiarly individual approach to melody. This is not in one continuous line, but is constructed on a definite plan which allows for development. It is accordingly more sectional than the music lovers of his early days were accustomed to hearing. This construction shows careful attention to balance, and the widening of certain intervals (later to be the particular individuality of Franck and his pupils) finds its earliest examples in Gounod. We can see in Gounod's songs all the differences between the Teutonic 'Lied' and the Gallic 'Mélodie'. Of course Gounod used the same constructive principles in his operas, but, strangely enough, they do not seem to be so paramount in the sacred works.

Of Gounod's songs, this constructivism is perhaps seen at its easiest in the song 'L'Absent' where 'B' echoes 'A', proceeding each side of the opening note [Ex. 5]. As another example, we quote the music in *Faust*, when at the end of Act III, Marguerite opens her window and invokes Night [Ex. 6].

In both these examples we find a complete absence

of the stilted four-, eight-, or sixteen-bar phrase beloved by Gounod's predecessors. The same principle underlies the beautiful 'Le Soir'.

5

"A"



6



Further than this, in the charming 'Sérénade', Gounod divides the melodic interest between the voice and the accompaniment. This song is a little gem. To mention these few points is to mention every song he wrote, for the thought repeated itself in design—but certainly not in content. It was when Gounod grew ambitious and tried to write what one feels he thought to be a great song, as, for example, the 'Hymne à Sainte-Cécile', that he proved dull.

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He never wrote music to hang on to the words. He maintained the spirit of the poem by the rise and fall of the notes and kept that poem in the forefront. Thus he puzzled his listeners in the shape of the melodies, for they were accustomed to regard the words as of little moment. He was therefore quite at home when setting prose, so far as the accents were concerned.

With the exception of the above-quoted 'Sérénade' his accompaniments never obtrude themselves, and if the pianism is very simple and straightforward it must be laid at the door of the period, and, unfortunately, his was a period whose mannerisms, by reason of their simplicity, soon fell into disuse and the music became dated. Gounod's pianism is in an extended form of the Mendelssohn tradition, but not so fully developed as to be related to Schumann.

Gounod's versatility has been suggested in his *Méthode pour Cornet à Pistons*. This is still further shown in some isolated works he wrote for other instruments. The Philharmonic Concert in 1887 included the first performance of a *Concerto pour Pédal pédalier*, an instrument brought forward by Pleyel and for which Schumann wrote his *Six Fugues on the name BACH*, and the *Studies* and *Sketches*. In common with most French composers Gounod was full of interest in new inventions and he did not hesitate to contribute to the repertoire of anything which seemed promising. The harmonium had also been perfected about the same time, and Gounod wrote *Six Fugues*

which could be commended to organists in search of unfamiliar music for their recitals.

In 1882 the Duke of Albany was married to the Princess Helen of Waldeck-Pyrmont. Gounod obliged with a *Wedding March*, composed, so the copy stated, 'at the express desire of Her Majesty the Queen'. It was written for organ and three trombones, a combination which worried the *Musical Times* by its novelty. The Duke of Albany seems to have had a curious fascination for Gounod, for he wrote what he called *Wedding March No. 2 dedicated to the Duke of Albany K.G.*, perhaps on the grounds that after all it was the Duke's wedding and he ought to have a piece specially for himself. This was written for orchestra and was played at Windsor Castle the night before the wedding. Did the English musicians regard this foreign intruder in those days in the same way that they do in ours? No. 2 was performed in public at the following Birmingham Festival. Both Marches included the National Anthem in quadruple time, as might be expected; hence the three trombones in No. 1.

Gounod would not appear to have had a very strongly developed sense of humour, but he attempted a *Suite Burlesque* for orchestra. This work did not proceed very far, but one movement was completed which not so many years ago was often to be heard at the Promenade Concerts. The *Funeral March of a Marionette* was for a long time considered the essence of wit, but like all musical humour it did

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not have a very long life. The piece itself figured in text-books on orchestration as an example of how to make the bassoon sound so extremely funny that the listener was bound to split his sides with laughter. The piece has a 'programme' or story. A marionette, having been killed in a fight with another member of the company, is given a dignified funeral. On the way to the churchyard the mourners stop for a drink and stay talking merrily for some while. Eventually the procession goes on its way.

This friendly little piece is of no great moment. It could not take any place in a concert of serious music today as can other works in the burlesque style, but it has its value in a programme of light music. Coming from Gounod, it has added interest. In any case there is no reason for its almost complete neglect.

It must have been the viewpoint of Gounod as an operatic composer which has caused the absolute neglect of his symphonies (in D and E), works of no great length or depth but exquisitely neat and deftly wrought, particularly the *Petite Symphonie* written for the *Société des Instruments à vent*.

Chapter V

SUMMARY

GOUNOD was unfortunate in living when he did, when music was in the air, so to speak, and composers were finding a new expression. He is probably one of the worst treated by posterity and suffered many things during his lifetime. The failure of his operas may have been due to the fact that they were too new for their period; yet we have the contradiction of this in *Faust* and *Mireille*, particularly, of course, the former. In the pretentious operas he fell below the popular Meyerbeer whose supremacy, though challenged, had not yet been eradicated or supplanted. If we compare the operas like *Le Médecin malgré lui* and *Philémon et Baucis*, *opéra-comique* in the truest form, with those of Boïeldieu, Méhul and Grétry, we see the difference at once. There are no easy-going tunes by themselves. The orchestra plays altogether too important a part. Audiences were accustomed to a mere background of music which simply supported the singers. Gounod brought the orchestra pit into prominence. This would have been all right at the Opéra, but was too ambitious for the 'Opéra-comique'; yet it was not ambitious enough for the former until *Faust*. Only one of Gounod's operas are 'Grand'. It would only need a revival of the two works singled out above and the crushing of a certain

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amount of prejudice to place them in the repertoire. The only way to do this is by means of radio. Revival in the theatre could come only after a certain amount of radio plugging, which would arouse the necessary interest. *Mireille* would probably not succeed because it is too ambitious, and today would seem to fall between the two stools.

One thing is certain. Whether *Faust* is original or plagiarized, it should not fall into complete neglect. Its importance is supreme in musical history and the repertoire cannot do without it. It has rested long enough. The imaginative poetry of the garden scene and the awful and tragic grandeur of that in the church can bear comparison anywhere. It is a work whose qualities only the most musically blasé and the most prejudiced Goethe worshipper can deny.

Gounod's orchestration is on strictly classical lines. He never used instruments simply for effect or colour, but he knew exactly how to make them effective within their own scope. There are no signs by which we can recognize Gounod in the way that we recognize Rossini by his 'crescendi' and Meyerbeer by his 'cantilenae' and 'cadenzas' for solo instruments, and his vulgar brass unisonal writing. Gounod's orchestration is all part of the whole thought.

Harmonically it seems strange that in his time he was regarded almost as the Stravinsky of the period. To find the reason for this we must look backwards and see what had happened with his immediate predecessors. The general approach was that of a simple

tune with an even simpler accompaniment, which always remained in the background. Gounod made the harmonic background of equal importance with the melody, and he used it emotionally. His melody we have already discussed and have seen how it is never sinuous.

In the concert hall the *Funeral March of a Marionette* has long ceased to play a part, but the symphonies should be revived because of their Gallic lightness, particularly in the writing for wood-wind.

The incidental music has failed to find a place in the form of suites and it is music which we can only speak of as having existed. It is available, however, and although not as complete as the similar music of Bizet, a judicious selection would add variety to our concerts of light music.

I suppose there are still churches whose choirs delight in the Anthems, and these are the best of the sacred music. In a previous chapter we have disposed of the two big choral works, both in part and in whole. Organ recitalists no longer fall back upon the sacred songs, so I am told.

What would Gounod's position have been if he had not written *Faust*? He would not have been quite forgotten because of *Roméo et Juliette* and *Mireille*, but he would not have been so important. He would, therefore, have lain among the composers of French opera who are spoken of as having contributed to the national culture. As it is, Gounod's is an honoured name. He said things which had not been said before,

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even if they have been said better since his time. We may detest his personality and, in general, his aesthetics, but there is no gainsaying his importance. He established a clearly defined French thought from the roots of the earlier French music.

In the mistaking of his natural bent (opera for religious mysticism) he was not alone. Saint-Saëns hoped to be considered the French Wagner; Massenet longed to be a composer of symphonies. Had Gounod been content to follow opera we should have been the richer, for there is no doubt that *Faust* and *Mireille* proved his abilities and worth, and the latter at any rate contained seeds for germination.

It is easy, of course, to be wise after the event.

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